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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ideologues, both of the far Left and the far Right, and their influences on the American political structure and our "traditional pluralistic politics," which is defined as the concept traditionally held in this country that politics function within a clash of interests, sectional and group, and that political decisions are best understood as compromises between these clashing interests. Our democratic society has difficulty coping with ideologues because they endanger pluralistic politics in three ways: by closing the political process to their opposition, by transferring essentially political conflicts into nonpolitical areas, and by impairing democratic discussion. Further, the overriding reason for the anti-pluralism of ideologues is that they are more attached to their ideology than to the democratic process, an attachment demanded by the intertwining of the epistemology and personality. (RN)

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THE DEMOCRATIC ALBATROSS

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THE DEMOCRATIC ALBATROSS

The American political structure has never been able to cope with ideologues. At every point where American political collapse was imminent ideologues were at the center of the controversy. The country shattered violently on the ideologue-fueled slavery issue; political eruptions were sparked early in this century by the Palmer raids; the Depression nurtured widely diverse ideological actors--from Norman Thomas to Father Coughlin to Huey Long to the Communist Party U.S.A. to the German-American Bund; the Fifties found us floundering in the morass of McCarthyism; and our awkward responses to the actions of contemporary ideologues--Right and Left, Black and White--merely demonstrate once more the difficulty they pose for our society.

That ideologues play havoc with us is obvious; why they do so is less apparent. Political scientists generally explain that ideologues take positions based on morality, and morals are not adjudicable. Our folk phrases attest to the process--"You can't do business with the Devil," "You can't legislate morality," etc.

Without denying that ideologues take moral stands, this explication seems incomplete and insufficient. First, it does not explain why some people choose empirical and psychological stances that constrain them to frame essentially political issues in moral terms. And secondly, it does not explain why ideologues cause so much trouble in our political affairs.

The first of these, why some people perceive issues on a morality continuum, can best be answered by examining the epistemology and personality of ideologues.

Ideologues have a basically anti-intellectual epistemology in that they trust their own intuitive feelings more than they do the rules of

logic. Exemplary of this approach to reality is the Extreme Rightist:

> He can resort to blatant over-generalizing from whatever evidence he may have started with (if any)--because he is not restricted by the rules the rest of us follow in arriving at generalizations --such rules as the unreliability of arriving at broad claims on the basis of a single case. He can indulge openly in what the rest of us might feel was patent distortion of facts--because he is simply acting on a different means of establishing facts. He is not bound by ordinary rules of inference in tying his conclusions to his observations --for he rejects the rules of logic as effective checks along the route to reality. And since he has rejected--both individually and collectively --these steps that the rest of us view essential to arriving at knowledge, he obviously is not obligated to accept the knowledge we have established this way. He is thus free to dismiss altogether and out of hand, what the rest of us see as demonstrably true.[1]

The epistemology of the Far Right is determined largely by fundamentalist philosophy concerning the nature of God and the nature of man. The God of the Far Right more nearly approximates the wrathful God of the Old Testament than the loving and forgiving God of the New Testament:

> This God is not only empirically unknowable but fearfully omnipotent and an avenger.
>
> This God demands complete subservience. The fundamentalist God demands abject conformity to a set of spiritual mandates, not to make fellow man's lot better on earth, but to avoid his vengeance after death.
>
> God's fearful omnipotence serve to reinforce a sense of subservience among reactionaries. Such subverience inevitably leads to a fear reaction and a need for certainty. By his nature, then, the fundamentalist God is God of the frightened believer who feels a need for absolute certainty-- a certainty so uncharacteristic of this world.[2]

Beliefs concerning the nature of man likewise are central in determining Far Right epistemology: "Man is an abject sinner under the just condemnation of God. Man is basically suspect; man is untrustworthy; man is evil."[3]

The ways in which these two beliefs interweave to produce the epistemology of the Far Right are obvious. God can not be known empirically, i.e., through the senses; He can only be known through faith. The human who so knows Him also knows God's truth; that is, belief leads to knowledge. Further, belief is the only avenue to knowledge because other men, inherently evil, control all the communication media and because without knowledge of the ultimate truth (the nature of God) lesser truths will be misinterpreted.

Ideologues of the Left, of course, do not share the epistemology of the Right, but for other reasons they share the Far Right distrust of the rules of logic, preferring instead their own intuitive powers. The non-rational nature of ideological epistemology was epitomized by the slogan of the Right concerning Goldwater's candidacy in 1964. They said, "In your heart you know he's right," and they meant the slogan as a refutation of the "rational" arguments against which Goldwater was pitting his conservative stance. Non-rationalism on the Left can be found in their adamant stand in contending that the Viet Nam war was being conducted for the benefit of Wall Street, a position from which they never deviated despite the fact that the Market took a dive with each esscalation of the war. The important point of these examples is that neither side felt a compulsion to prove its case; they had arrived intuitively at the truth and all that remained was to state it.

This anti-intellectual, pro-intuitive epistemology of ideologues is intimately related to personality orientations, especially that orientation known as ethnocentrism. The ideologue may be characterised by his ethnocentricity in that he rejects outgroups and has trouble identifying with

humanity. One who is ethnocentric regards his own group with an almost nationalistic fervor and regards those not in his group as an extreme nationalist would regard a foreigner. "A primary characteristic of ethnocentric ideology is the generality of outgroup rejection. It is as if the ethnocentric individual feels threatened by most of the groups to which he does not have a sense of belonging; if a group is not acceptable, it is alien."[4]

The integrating of ideological ethnocentricity with the epistemology of ideologues is apparent. If you have rejected the rules of logic as a means of testing the ideas of another, you are only left with one remaining standard--your own ideas. Thus, if the other agrees with you he is a friend; if he disagrees, an enemy. Ethnocentricity coalesces with non-rational epistemology, which explains the Far Right's predilection for the old House Unamerican Activities Committee and the Far Left's contention, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." There can be no middle ground, no honestly uncommitted persons; as far as the ideologue is concerned, you're either for him or against him. To ideologues, then, all issues are moral--either because of the nature of the issue itself or because the act of taking stands on issues is the only way an individual can prove his fealty to the group.

Knowing that ideologues are anti-rational and ethnocentric we can begin now to answer our second question--why they cause so much trouble in our political affairs. And the major answer seems to be that their epistemology and personality lead them to oppose traditional pluralistic politics. By "traditional pluralistic politics" we refer to the concept that American politics have traditionally been carried on through the

clash of interests, sectional and group and that political decisions are best understood as compromises between these clashing interests. This pluralistic process is directly opposed to ideological politics. Another way of explaining the same thing would be to say that Americans traditionally have been more devoted to the pluralistic (or democratic) process than to any one given solution or set of solutions. Not so the ideologues, and this is precisely what is meant when it is contended, "extremists are . . . dangerous simply because their loyalties are not to the democratic process."[5]

This anti-pluralism of ideologues is expressed in three distinct ways that the larger society has trouble coping with: (1) they close the political process to their opposition, (2) they carry political conflicts into non-political arenas, and (3) they impair pluralistic discussion.

Joseph R. Gusfield indicates that attempts to close the political process to the opposition are typical of extremist groups: "Politics is held to be the legitimate area of conflict for some, but not for all groups. Both Fascism and Communism have made this a cornerstone of the political structure as well as a tenet of their movement."[6] This facet of the Far Right is well known. They are violently opposed, for instance, to allowing Communists to speak on college campuses. They attempt to intimidate their opposition into silence, often through name-calling. When Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. debated a representative of the Russian delegation to the United Nations at the University of Kansas, right-wing ideologues sponsored a bill in the Kansas legislature prohibiting Communists from speaking on campus. Their rationale: what is the sense

of having two Communists debate one another? Further, Roberts and Lewin conclude that ". . . the extreme right is attempting to intimidate all members of the news media who raise any question uncomfortable to the rightists."[7] The Left engages in the same process when students refuse to allow Armed Forces representstives on campus to recruit, or make so much noise that an establishment leader can not make himself heard. At a recent National Peace Action Coalition convention at Hunter College, S.D.S. members shouted down Senator Vance Hartke as he attempted to speak out against the war, not because of disagreement with his stand on the issue but because of his general support of Establishment politics.

Obviously, attempts to silence the opposition are troubling because they occasionally are successful--and in this they are not much different from the silencing effect stemming from the pronouncements of a Vice President who dichotomizes the country into patriotic Americans versus "an effete corps of impudent snobs." Any time a citizen of a pluralistic society is intimidated into silence, his citizenship has been impaired and the intelligence he might have brought to the public arena has been lost to society. This dual effect indicates the danger in allowing ideologues to close the political process to their opposition.

The second expression of the anti-pluralism of ideologues is that they carry political controversy outside the sphere of politics. They ". . . attempt to carry on social and economic conflicts outside of political institutions although the confinement of conflict to politics marks a cardinal principle of democratic politics . . ."[8] Whether it is a matter of transferring politics into the arena of public education à la the firing of Communist Party member Angela Davis, blacklisting

performers into silence as in the Hollywood Ten case, or placing economic boycotts on businesses which do not hew their ideological line (Polish hams and Russian vodka), the Far Right demonstrates its anti-pluralism in non-political realms. Other ideologues do likewise. The S.D.S. presents its non-negotiable political demands to educators at Columbia University, Young Lords demand reparations from the Riverside Church, and the Ku Klux Klan operates against practically every kind of integrated economic enterprise.

Ideologues also demonstrate their opposition to pluralism by impairing democratic discussion through their attempts to silence their opposition, support private and public censorship, and monopolize the communication of their adherents with voluminous publications of their own. As long as they do not have political control of the country they can not fully realize any of these goals; however, they still can hamper democratic discussion and thus the quality of pluralistic politics by creating an atmosphere of distrust.

Ideologues generate distrust of our leaders and of citizens who oppose them. The semantics of distrust are rampant in contemporary society--the "Comsymps" of the Far Right, the "Pigs" of the Far Left, the "niggers" of the Segregationists, the "honkys" of the Black Militants, along with the euphemisms of more moderate partisans, such as "the breakdown of law and order," "the liberal (or Eastern) establishment," "the military-industrial complex," and that most general of all the phrases, "you can't trust anybody over thirty."

Virginia Lewis documents the effect of this distrust upon democratic discussion: "When a large number of citizens of any country come profoundly

to distrust the highest officials of their government, the political consensus that is the necessary foundation for any democratic representative government is impaired. Such distrust can become a form of political self-fulfilling prophecy; the German experience of the 1920's is an example."[9] Treating the opposition as disloyal or not worthy of consideration destroys the foundation of pluralistic politics. That is, if pluralism means compromise between contending interests, that compromise can only be accomplished in an atmosphere where each interest accepts the legitimacy of the opposing interests. Engaging in the semantics of distrust makes compromise impossible by closing the door to discussion between contending interests. Ideologues endanger pluralistic politics by destroying the possibility of communicative interchange--the essential requirement of compromise.

In summary, ideologues are difficult to cope with because they endanger pluralistic politics in three ways: (1) by closing the political process to their opposition, (2) by transferring essentially political conflicts into non-political areas, and (3) by impairing democratic discussion. The overriding reason for the anti-pluralism of ideologues is that they are more attached to their ideology than they are to the democratic process, an attachment demanded by the successful integration of a non-rational epistemology and an ethnocentric personality structure.

Oscar Gass explains, through analogy, why ideologues are not enthralled with the democratic process: "I know that democracy is a technique for reaching agreement, but it in turn rests upon a measure of agreement. It is, of course, formally true that, if only you agree on the technique of getting decisions, you don't have to agree on the outcome. But that is

merely like saying that people can ride on the same bus even if they wish to get off at different places. The places must not be too different--or else they have to set a value on riding beyond that of getting to their destinations."[10] To extend the analogy, the threat to our society posed by the anti-pluralism of ideologues is less that there are some disgruntled riders than that they might pressure the stockholders of the company into rerouting the bus.

FOOTNOTES

1. Mary Anne Raywid, "Extremist Groups: Friend or Foe?," New York State Education, 53 (November, 1965) pp. 10-11.

2. Dale G. Leathers, "Epistemological Dilemma of Today's 'New Right' Persuader," paper presented at S.A.A. convention, Chicago, Illinois, December 28, 1966, pp. 5-6.

3. Ibid, p. 7.

4. T.W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford and Associates. The Authoritarian Personality. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950, p. 147.

5. Naomi V. Katcher, "Extremist Patterns--Can We Recognize Them?," New York State Education, 53 (January, 1966) p. 11.

6. Joseph R. Gusfield, "Mass Society and Extremist Politics," American Sociological Review, 27 (February, 1962) p. 23.

7. Clete Roberts and George Lewin, "Right-Wing Maneuver; Pressure on the News Media," Frontier, 15 (September, 1964) p. 11.

8. Gusfield, op. cit., p. 23.

9. Virginia E. Lewis, "The Psychopathic Right and the Supreme Court," Frontier, 15 (December, 1963) p. 12.

10. Quoted in Gusfield, op. cit., p. 27.